

Malte Hagener and Yvonne Zimmermann (eds), *How Film Histories Were Made: Materials, Methods, Discourses*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2023, 530 pp.

For the last four decades academic film historians, whose task became to professionalize and systematize the study of the past of the moving image and related screen media have been complaining that it is high time for some “film historical introspection and retrospection” to take place, without however offering any concrete models as to what that would look like, beyond the observation that how we define our medium also determines the sources and the approach to historical inquiry that we adopt.<sup>1</sup> To inquire about cinema’s past necessarily entails inquiring about the ways in which previous historians defined this subject and the methods they used to approach it. This is what the authors of *the How Film Histories Were Made: Materials, Methods, Discourses* led by editors Malte Hagener and Yvonne Zimmermann set out to accomplish, in a collection of essays that is international in scope and covers a wide terrain of national filmmaking traditions with an equally broad methodological palette.

The editors argue that the discourse we now recognize as film history and that emerged between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s has always been contingent, incomplete and materially grounded, drawing from and at the same opening up to a variety of neighboring fields like history, film preservation and curation. It is a truism nowadays to say that the dead ends, obsolete technologies and failures of the film industry are just as important to our understanding of its evolution as the practices that were institutionalized, but this book succeeds in demonstrating what a critical, interdisciplinary practice of historiography can do for a field that has often resembled, in the words of the late Thomas Elsaesser whose essay heads the volume, a “translucent ember of our celluloid heritage,” fetishizing the past for the sake of the future (p. 57). Where the volume displays less coherence is in the definition of historiography (or reflexive metahistory or archaeology of film history as the case may be) that it promotes. For Daniel Woolf, historiography can mean one or more of four things:

a study of historical methods; (b) the review and study of the state of knowledge and key debates in one national area, subdiscipline, or historical event; (c) the history of historical writing; and (d) something very close to or synonymous with “history,” that is, an account of the past.<sup>2</sup>

Readers of *How Film Histories Were Made* will be frequently confused as to which one of these each author accepts, although the third and fourth ones predominate without any programmatic coherence among sections.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Allen, “Film History: The Narrow Discourse,” in *The 1977 Film Studies Annual: Part Two, Film. Historical- Theoretical Speculations*, ed. Ben Lawton and Janet Staiger (Pleasantville, Redgrave, 1977), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4- 5

Several of the contributions interpret film historiography as either what Hayden White once called “historiophoty” – the manifold ways of representing historical events on the silver screen – or else furnish revisionist readings of film culture that would more aptly be called film history.<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Baer’s analysis of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) as “a meditation on conceptions of time and history” (p. 89) and a metahistorical critique of positivism certainly engages with the work of past film historians and theorists like Siegfried Kracauer but focuses almost exclusively on the film’s narrative and staging rather than on any implications the film’s reception had for the writing of film history in Germany and around the world. Similarly, Arvind Rajagopal provides a brief history of the non-fiction work produced by the Indian Film Division to illuminate the mythological realism and nationalistic overtones of recent Bhojpuri documentaries. Both these chapters construct original arguments based on extensive reviews of the literature but what they and others in the book (e.g. those by Volker Pantenburg and Firat Oruc) lack is any direct connection with the editors’ stated ambition to illuminate “how film history [itself] became the way it is today – and why it does not look any other way” (p. 14). In other words, reflexivity and the narrative dimensions of history as storytelling are often lost sight of. What is rightfully centered throughout the book is a transnational and transmedial conception of history-writing that reminds readers why cinema has so often been compared with a real-life time machine. Missing are chapter summaries that weave the various perspectives together to better demonstrate the various glosses of the term “historiography” instead of simply summarizing their content, a task which could have been accomplished in Hagener and Zimmermann’s introductory chapter or by using shorter introductions to each of the five sections of the book.

As things stand, the volume’s segmentation shows little natural progression with section titles often reading like a laundry list of topics that could have just as easily been grouped otherwise. The editors are particularly interested in digital humanities and the methodologies of new media history; they dedicate a portion of their introduction to a quantitative analysis of film history publications from 1911 to 1939 that while intriguing is never fully developed and clearly calls for a separate chapter of its own, comparable to the one co-authored by Vinzenz Hediger and Alexandra Schneider on the scalability of historical analyses of film. Together with Chiara Grizzafi’s consideration of recent videographic film histories, Franziska Heller’s theorization of the digital dispositifs of film restoration from DVDs to streaming platforms, and Sarah-Mai Dang’s rethinking of the potential and limitations of data visualization for feminist film historiography, they represent a rich vein of forward-looking studies into the *how* and the *why* of historical discourse on media today.

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<sup>3</sup> Hayden White, “Historiography and Historiophoty,” *American Historical Review* 93 (1988): 1193-1199.

Several authors anchor their entries around (a) central figure(s) reflecting the extent to which film history as both a scholarly and popular genre of publishing has been defined by the proclivities of and biases toward a few influential figures. Thus Francesco Pitassio examines the work of Francesco Pasinetti and Carlo Lizzani in publishing, teaching and institution-building, Masha Salazkina uncovers Jay Leyda's formative years in the USSR as one of Eisenstein's mentees at the VGIK when the first serious efforts to systematize the archiving and documentation of Russian and Soviet film history took place, while Yvonne Zimmerman returns to Hans Richter's New York years engaged in polemics around the avant-garde (of which he was an integral part) and the way it would be remembered in print, on screen and in the classroom.

More narrowly historiographical and so closer to the book's focus on "film histories in the making" (p. 33) and of "collecting and curating as historiographical projects" (p. 34) are chapters by Elftheria Thanouli, Charles Acland, Michael Cowan and Jane Gaines. Thanouli elucidates the distinctions between the writing and the showing of film history. To the organicist model of history that has dominated published accounts of the medium's evolution thus far, she juxtaposes "historying" as an active process in expository and interactive documentaries. If one wishes for more fully developed case studies (*Marlene* by Maximilien Schell and *The Last Bolshevik* by Chris Marker are used as examples) and a smoother synthesis of the philosophy of history with the more canonical texts of Bordwell and Elsaesser, the author nonetheless provides a cogent précis of an argument she has elaborated more fully in her recent monograph *History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines*.<sup>4</sup> In an argumentative essay that traces the parallel rise of the film education movement in initiatives of the British Film Institute since the 1950s and cultural studies at Birmingham and Oxford, Acland makes a case for locating the origins of film history and study in "workers', adult and extension teaching situations" (p. 278) in the British context. Filled with insight ("some of the best paths to the heart of filmic life are not through cinema at all" [p. 264]), but occasionally sidetracked into the academic politics of Marxist historiography, this chapter is a model for institutional histories of the field which also aspire to do history "from below" (p. 272). Cowan's chronicle of Wilhelmine-era film societies and, more expansively, German film communities shares this bottom-up approach to "cinephilic sociability" (p. 316). In excavating the great variety of workers clubs, educational groups and technological guilds, their activities and memberships, Cowan elucidates the tactics used by such collectives to influence modes of spectatorship and consumer demand thus shaping how cinema was understood and subsequently historicized at the very moment when movies were going mainstream. Adding to her numerous articles on the strategic omission of women from cinema histories and the philosophy of film history, Jane Gaines draws on Reinhart Koselleck's

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<sup>4</sup> Elftheria Thanouli, *History and Film: A Tale of Two Disciplines* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

notions of “historical time” and “historical prognostication” in her parallel histories of two film pirates (Siegmond Lubin and cyberpirate Kim Dotcom) who were active roughly a century apart.<sup>5</sup> This materialist, asynchronous but theoretically rich intervention will be of interest to anyone interested in reconsidering the role of periodization in film history and the “newness” of new media.

The triple index of persons, institutions and films offered in the back of the volume is useful but lacking a similar list of subjects and key terms, while the quality of the (quite few) illustrations varies considerably among chapters. As is clear from the diversity and scope of the scholarship described above, the anthology closely complies to the format of the volume of conference proceedings and that is indeed how it originated – eighteen of the original twenty-three papers are published here. That does not preclude its use in teaching of specialized seminars or as a corrective to existing compilations on “new cinema history” and media archaeology.

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<sup>5</sup> Koselleck, *Future Pasts: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. and with an introduction by Keith Tribe. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).